

# **Op-ed Are You Ready?**

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Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath have been played out before our eyes on the TV screens in our homes. We have seen the sometimes total destruction of property and the deaths of many people, even whole families. Now the question being asked of me frequently is, "How ready are we for such a catastrophic disaster?" I'll provide you with some facts about what government has been doing on a regional basis with other public and private partners, and also ask you a question that only you can answer.

First of all, let me tell you that our risks are every bit as great as coastal communities in the South, except for the fact that we have earthquakes here and the most dangerous volcano in North America is in our back yard. Our worst case event is not of the type of earthquake we experienced in 1949, 1965 or in 2001. It is the Seattle Fault that is most worrisome. This fault runs perpendicular to the Puget Sound, starting in Kitsap County and running East, generally parallel to I-90 and off into the foothills of the Cascade Mountains.

What distinguishes our region of the country from other areas of the nation is the level of regional collaboration that we have been able to achieve based on public and private partners being willing to put aside their individual differences in support of regional coordination.

- Nothing exemplifies this more than the Regional Disaster Plan. We started with regional disaster planning in 1998. The King County Region has been recognized by the 9/11 Commission for its approach of including the private sector as full partners. Currently there are 128 public and private signatory agencies to this plan.
- Counties have agreed to support one another when disaster strikes. King, Pierce and Snohomish Counties have been joined by another six counties throughout the state in establishing what is called the Inter-county Mutual Aid Agreement.
- Public agencies along with selected private partners have banded together to share breaking emergency news with one another and the general public by the creation of a web site called [www.rpin.org](http://www.rpin.org) 60 organizations can now independently post their news on this site and citizens can register to have information on breaking news sent to their email, pager, PDA, or cell phone.
- Even during an era of Federal emphasis on the terrorism hazard, we have as a region remained focused to the maximum extent possible on an all-

hazards approach to disaster preparedness and response. Even our Homeland Strategic Plan notes this emphasis.

- We have attempted to allocate the homeland security funds in a manner that builds up regional capacity. While individual cities might not have exactly the same amount of specialized equipment, we have chosen to look at strengthening our ability as a region versus looking at the narrow minded “me, my, I” tug of war we’ve seen played out in other parts of the nation.
- Public education has been an area of emphasis. One of the strongest allies any government has is a prepared populace. Individuals, families, businesses, schools, nursing homes, hospitals, etc. have improved their preparedness levels in recent times. Yet, more work needs to be done.
- Just this year, the National Association of Counties recognized King County and its regional partners for our collective “Regional Approach to Homeland Security.” This award confirms our status as a national leader in working together as partners, not competitors.
- Regional Mitigation Planning and our Joint Washington Task Force 1 Urban Rescue Task Force are but two more examples of what we can achieve either within geographic King County, or when working with our broader central Puget Sound regional partners.
- King County government with the assistance of you citizens have made long term investments in our seismic safety. These improvements include the construction of a “next-generation” Regional Communications and Emergency Coordination Center (RCECC) and ongoing seismic safety mitigation projects for the King County Courthouse and Harborview Hospital.

Now for it is my turn to ask a question. How prepared are “You” for a disaster? Our public opinion surveys show that people may be overrating their level of preparedness. People think that if they have a flashlight somewhere, food in the pantry, and water stored from Y2K days you are ready. This however is not what disaster preparedness looks like. I would like to challenge you to do something today to improve your personal and family preparedness. And, to inquire about the level of disaster preparedness at your workplace, schools, assisted living, or nursing homes.

Remember, what gets checked, gets done! It is your responsibility to be self-sufficient for a minimum of three days, and even more in case of a worst case disaster.

Please visit our web site at [www.metrokc.gov/prepare](http://www.metrokc.gov/prepare) for more information on what we have been doing as a region, and to find out how you personally can become better prepared for a disaster. And, join us and others at the Seattle Center on October 21-22 (check dates) for the “Are You Ready?” disaster preparedness fair.